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THE

PROGRESS OF ERROR

CONCERNING

THE PERSON OF CHRIST.

REPRESENTED IN

A SERMON,

DELIVERED AT

THE UNITARIAN CHAPEL,

IN ESSEX-STREET,

March 31, 1805.

BY THOMAS BELSHAM.

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TO

THE TRUSTEES

OF

THE CHAPEL IN ESSEX-STREET

APPROPRIATED TO THE WORSHIP OF

THE ONE GOD;

AND TO

THE CONGREGATION

OF

UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS

WHO ASSEMBLE THERE,

THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED UPON

THE OCCASION OF HIS ENTERING UPON

THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTRY AMONG THEM,

AND

PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,

IS INSCRIBED

IN TESTIMONY OF ESTEEM AND GRATITUDE,

BY THEIR AFFECTIONATE FRIEND

AND OBEDIENT SERVANT,

THOMAS BELSHAM.

School of Theology
at Claremont

1603

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THOMAS BRIGHAM.

A SERMON.

MATTHEW, XVI. 13.

WHO, DO MEN SAY THAT I THE SON OF MAN AM?

WHAT astonishment, and what horror, if I may be allowed the expression, would have seized the spirit of our meek and lowly master, the humblest, the holiest, and the most devout of mankind, if, in reply to this plain question, the dictate perhaps of natural and innocent curiosity, he had been informed by his disciples, Some say that thou art a celestial spirit, inhabiting and animating a human body; some say that thou art the created maker and governor of the world; some say that thou art the wisdom and power of God in human shape; some say that thou art a great angel, the delegate of the supreme Jehovah, who didst formerly appear to our forefathers upon mount Sinai, acting as his representative, assuming his great and incommunicable name, and

challenging divine honours; some say that thou art the first and greatest of created intelligences, by whose instrumentality the universe was brought into existence, by whose energy it is supported, and by whose authority it is governed: and, finally, there are some who, extravagant as it may appear, even maintain that thou art a second person in what they call a holy and glorious trinity; and that, being a necessary emanation from the substance of the Father, thou art in all the attributes of godhead equal to him, and one with him, and with a third divine and equal person, called the holy ghost, who, together with thee and the Father, make up the one true God.

I verily believe that if any thing could have excited in this "great apostle and high-priest of our profession" a sentiment of regret at having undertaken the office to which he was appointed by the Father, or a feeling of desire to forego that honourable distinction, it would have been the foresight of that gross delusion into which his professed disciples in after ages would be betrayed, the strange conceits which they would entertain with respect to the dignity of his person and the nature of his office, and the idolatrous homage which they would offer to him, in the room and almost to the exclusion of that infinite Being who was the only proper object of his worship

and of theirs—" his Father and their Father, his God and their God."

From this painful foreknowledge our blessed Master was probably in this stage of his mission mercifully exempted. Nothing occurs in the history or in the discourses of Christ which could lead the attentive reader to conclude that, during his personal ministry, he had the least apprehension of those disgraceful corruptions of doctrine and practice which afterwards took place. Little did he then expect that "the fine gold would so soon become dim," and that the spotless purity of the virgin church would be so soon exchanged for the attire and the character of a harlot. The suspicion that Jesus, the son of man, the humble prophet of Nazareth, would ever be regarded in any other light than as a human being, distinguished from his brethren by a heavenly commission and the communication of supernatural powers, does not appear to have entered into the mind, either of Jesus himself, or of any of those amongst whom he lived, and with whom he conversed; whether his disciples or the multitude, whether friends or enemies.

The answer which his apostles made to the interrogatory in the text, is plain and natural. "Who do men say that I the son of man am? And they said, Some say thou art John the Bap-

tist, some say Elias, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Struck with the sublimity of his doctrine, the authority of his language, the dignity of his character, and the magnificence of his miracles, the witnesses of these extraordinary scenes suspected that some one of the former prophets had been raised from the dead, and that he was come with a commission from God to be a teacher of truth and righteousness, a reformer of doctrine and morals, and a deliverer of the nation from the Roman yoke.

Our Lord pursues the inquiry. "But who say ye that I am? Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God." We believe that thou art the promised Messiah, foretold by the prophets, and declared by a voice from heaven to be the beloved son of God: and in whom we trust that all the promises of God shall be fulfilled.

Of this answer Jesus approved. And though he well knew that the apostle expected from him a participation of temporal honours and advantages, which he was not authorised to confer; yet knowing and approving his general integrity, he saith to him: "Blessed art thou, Simon, the son of Jonas, for flesh and blood has not revealed it to thee, but my Father who is in heaven." As though he had said, You are happy, Peter, in the true and

good confession which you have now made. But remember that this just conception of my character and office is not owing to your superior sagacity, nor to any human testimony. It has been your privilege to have been selected as one of my constant companions, and to have been yourself an eye witness of those extraordinary works by which the Father has borne witness to my character and doctrine. And in due time you shall yourself be sufficiently enlightened and qualified to teach my gospel to others. The name which I have given you signifies a rock. And upon your doctrine, as upon a rock of truth, shall that holy community be established, which, having been formed under my personal ministry, shall endure and prosper to the end of time. In opposition to which no form of superstition or idolatry shall stand, and against which no art nor violence shall prevail.

"Who do men say that I the son of man am?" I shall take occasion from these words to give a brief summary of the principal opinions which have been entertained among christians concerning the person of Christ, and to suggest some practical reflections upon the subject.

The first opinion which was entertained concerning Jesus Christ by his disciples was this: That he was a man like other* men; a native of

* Matt. xiii. 55. John, vi. 42.

Nazareth; the son of Joseph and Mary; distinguished, indeed, from all other human beings as a teacher sent from God; as that great prophet whose advent had been the object of a long series of remarkable prophecies from the earliest period of historical record; with whom were the words of eternal life; who was favoured with divine communications so far beyond all other prophets, that he was entitled to the honourable distinction of the beloved Son of God; that he was the true Messiah, the anointed king, the spiritual deliverer of the chosen people; and that he was also appointed as a light to lighten the gentiles, and to carry salvation to the ends of the earth. These are facts whose evidence is unquestionable. This is the true doctrine concerning the person of Christ. It is that doctrine which Peter and the other apostles believed upon a divine testimony. It is the rock upon which the church is built, and upon which Jesus pronounced his blessing.

The earliest corruption of this primitive doctrine is that which the apostles reported to their Master. Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some say Elias; and others Jeremiah, or one of the ancient prophets who is risen from the dead. This opinion soon subsided, and produced no permanent or important effect.

After the resurrection of Jesus, for the space of thirty years, the history of which is written by Luke, there does not appear to have been any question concerning the person of Christ, at least among the Hebrew converts. These, who were at first the most numerous class of believers, do not appear to have been at all disposed to invent any new opinions upon this subject. Their zeal was principally directed to the imposition of the ceremonial institute upon the gentile christians. They expected, and they found their promised Messiah to be one of their brethren, a man like themselves. Nor did they entertain the least suspicion that a person, who appeared in every respect like an ordinary man, who had been born and educated, who had conversed, and lived, and suffered, and died, like other men, could be any thing more than what he professed himself to be, a prophet raised up by God, like unto Moses*, their great lawgiver, to whose instructions it was their duty to hearken. Least of all did the Jewish believer, the most determined advocate for the proper unity of the Supreme Being, ever think of ascribing to the prophet and leader of the new dispensation the incommunicable attributes, works, and worship of the one true and living God. Nor does it appear that

* Deut. xviii. 15. Acts, iii. 22. vii. 37.

the Hebrew christians in after ages ever deviated into any material errors upon this subject*.

The heathen converts were under far greater temptation, and were themselves much more inclined, to innovations of this kind. They soon felt and smarted under the stigma of professing themselves the disciples of the crucified Jew; and this first prompted them to invent various fanciful notions concerning the person of Christ, in order to exalt, as they imagined, the rank and dignity of their master, and to rescue themselves from the reproach of the cross.

One of the first of these inventions appears to have been the doctrine of the miraculous conception of Jesus Christ: a fiction evidently of heathen origin, and introduced, probably, at the latter end of the first, or the beginning of the second century†. By this invention it was intend-

* Origen cont. Celsum, lib. ii. sect. 1. See upon this subject the controversy between Dr. Priestley and Dr. Horsley.

† See Dr. Priestley's History of Early Opinions, book iii. c. 20. Evanson's Dissonance, p. 32—53. 118—129. Mr. Lindsey very justly remarks, that the sufficiency of Christ for his office of teacher and saviour of the world, does not depend upon his miraculous conception. And that if the miraculous conception has been the invention of some early over-zealous christians, to do honour to Christ; when this is made to appear, and satisfactory evidence obtained how it was adopted or foisted into the sacred code, all judicious christians will readily give it up. Letters to the Youth of the two Universities, part i. p. 207—210.

ed to abate the prejudices of the idolatrous heathen against the person and character of Jesus, by placing him in this respect upon a level with the heroes and demigods of the ancient mythology, who, having been introduced into the world in similar circumstances, after having performed great exploits, had been admitted into the celestial abodes.

The next, if not even a prior corruption of the simplicity of the christian faith, was that of the Eastern philosophers, namely, that Christ was a man only in appearance, and not in reality; and that he only *seemed* to suffer and to die, but that he did not really and truly suffer*. This singular opinion was certainly introduced in the apostolic age. Many of the Gnostic philosophers, who assumed that title from their lofty pretensions to superior knowledge, not being able to resist the splendid evidence of the christian religion, were nevertheless ashamed of the low birth and the ignominious death of its author. They exalted Jesus, therefore, to the sublime dignity of an æon, or superangelic spirit, who condescended to appear on earth in a human form, *apparently* subject to all the incidents of humanity, but *in truth* entirely

* Lardner's Works, vol. iii. p. 541, 542; vol. ix. p. 233. Dr. Priestley's History of Early Opinions, book i. chap. iii. sect. 5. Mosheim's Eccl. History, cent. i. part ii. chap. 5. These heretics were called Docetæ.

unsusceptible of them, and incapable of suffering and pain. This pernicious doctrine, which subverted the foundation of the christian revelation, was combated both by Paul and John. The former stigmatizes it as dealing in foolish questions and endless genealogies*, as old wives' fables, and as science falsely so called†. The latter plainly denounces the abettors of this dangerous error, who deny that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, that is, that he was a real man, as deceivers and antichrists‡.

To this notion succeeded the curious speculation, that the Logos, or Word, that is, the wisdom or the power of God, was personified and dwelt in the man Jesus; but that after his resurrection and ascension into heaven, this attribute was again absorbed into the divine substance. In process of time this theory was im-

* 1 Tim. i. 4. Tit. iii. 9. The genealogies to which the apostle alludes were probably those of the Æons, the supposed descendants of those who were original emanations from the Supreme Being. Upon these unintelligible subjects the Gnostic philosophers held many absurd opinions, and engaged in many foolish controversies. See Lardner, Mosheim, and Priestley in the places before referred to.

† 1 Tim. iv. 7. 1 Tim. vi. 20. The apostle here alludes to the title which these vain philosophers assumed, Gnostics, from γνωσις, science.

‡ John, iv. 1—6. 2 John, v. 7.

proved; and the attribute having once become a person, was supposed ever after to retain its personal character. Hence arose the doctrine of the divine nature of Christ, and of his consubstantiality with the Father*.

At the beginning of the fourth century, Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, introduced the obnoxious and till then unheard of doctrine, that the Logos or Word of God was a created spirit, that there was a time when he did not exist, that he was made out of nothing, before all worlds, by the will and power of the Father, and that he was appointed by God to be his instrument and delegate to create and govern all finite beings. He maintained that this glorious spirit was in substance *similar* to, but not the *same* with, the Father. This novel and extraordinary doctrine gave birth to a vehement controversy, which divided the whole christian church, and which subsists to the present day†.

* Dr. Priestley's Hist. of Early Opinions, book ii. ch. 2.

† Dr. Priestley's Hist. of Early Opinions, book iv. chap. 1. Mosheim's Eccl. Hist. cent. iv. part ii. chap. 5. Socratis Hist. Eccl. lib. i. cap. 5, 6. The sixth chapter contains a circular letter of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, in which the angry prelate details, and denounces in the most vehement language, the alarming and dangerous tenets of this *new* heresy.

Those christians who assumed the name of orthodox, or, in other words, whose tenets were protected and patronised by the civil power, now began to contend still more earnestly for the proper deity and the distinct personality of the son, who, although he was derived from the Father, was in all respects equal to him, as one taper lighted by another may nevertheless burn with equal splendour*.

Soon after the commencement of the Arian controversy, a third person called the holy Ghost was added to the godhead, and declared to be one with, and equal to, the Father and the Son. This personage was at first represented as proceeding from the Father only. But after an interval of some centuries, the churches in the west of Europe discovered that the holy Spirit proceeded from the Son also, and inserted the article into their public creed. But the eastern churches refusing to make any alteration in the ancient formulary, a violent controversy arose, when the two churches excommunicated each

* Justin Martyr appears to have been the first who maintained the permanent personality of the Logos, but few if any of the Antenicene fathers contended for the perfect equality of the Son. Dr. Priestley, ibid. book ii. chap. 4. See Justin's high pretentions stated, in Mr. Lindsey's Second Address, c. ii. sect. 14, 15.

other, and an irreconcileable separation took place between them*.

In the heat of the Arian controversy, the zeal of some eminent disputants to support the proper distinction between the three persons in the trinity, induced them to maintain, that there were not only two natures, but also two persons in Christ, and that the virgin Mary was only the mother of Christ, and not the mother of God. This doctrine created a great schism in the eastern church, and a general council was summoned to decide the intricate question. This assembly of bishops determined, that though in Christ there were two natures, yet that both together constituted but one person: that God and man made one Christ: and that the virgin Mary was not only entitled to be called the mother of Christ, but that she had a right to the still higher distinction of the mother of God. The former opinion however found many advocates: and though the great patron of this doctrine †, was for this heresy

* Dr. Priestley, ibid. book ii. chap. 9. Mosheim's Eccl. Hist. cent. viii. part ii. chap. 3. cent ix. part ii. chap. 3. The word 'Filioque' was first added to the creed of Constantinople by the Spanish churches in the fifth and sixth centuries, and was afterwards adopted by all the Latin churches, though condemned by the popes.

† Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople.

expelled from his see, he became the founder of a very numerous and powerful sect, which flourishes in Asia even to the present time*.

Others, to avoid this extreme, ran into the opposite error; and contended not only that the two natures constituted one person, but that this person had but one will, and that the human nature of Christ was absorbed in the divine. The orthodox church approved of this doctrine no more than of the other: and another council was held which anathematized all who presumed to annihilate the human nature of Christ, and who affirmed that the will of the human nature was merged in the divine†.

At length in the fifth or sixth century the doctrine of the Trinity, as it is called, assumed its proper shape. The Father, the Son, and the holy Spirit, were each of them declared to be truly and properly God, "that none is before or after the other; that none is greater or less than another, but the whole three persons are co-eternal together and co-equal." And that

* Dr. Priestley, ibid. book iv. chap. 2. The Nestorian doctrine was condemned by the council of Ephesus, A. D. 431. Mosheim, ibid. cent. v. part ii. chap. 5.

† This was the doctrine of Eutyches, abbot of Constantinople, in the fifth century. It was condemned by the council of Chalcedon, A. D. 451.

" though the Father is God, the Son is God, and the holy Ghost is God, yet there are not three Gods but one God." Also, " that whosoever does not above all things receive this doctrine as an article of faith shall without doubt perish everlastingly*."

Such has been the origin and the progress of this great corruption of the christian doctrine concerning the person of Christ. Taking rise in an unworthy shame of the humble station, and ignominious death of the founder of the christian religion, it has gradually advanced to the most enormous height, and spread its baleful influence into every department of the christian church.

From age to age it has been transmitted even to the present day. So that if the question once proposed to the apostles should be now repeated to the body of professing christians, Who, say ye, that I the son of man am? one would answer in one way, and another in another, and very few indeed would return that reply which Jesus himself approved: " Thou art the Christ of God :" the promised Messiah, the faithful and approved messenger of God to man.

* Such is the doctrine of the creed erroneously ascribed to Athanasius, but more probably, as many learned men have suspected, forged by Vigilius Tapsensis, a notorious writer of the fifth century. See Griesbach. not. in 1 Joh. v. 7.

I shall now briefly insist upon those useful reflections, which occur from the general view which we have taken of the progress of error concerning the person of Christ.

1. This great diversity of opinions concerning the person of Christ, and the regards due to him, is a fact which could hardly have been expected antecedently to experience.

One grand object of the christian dispensation was to reform the idolatry of the heathen world. That this magnificent design should have been conceived and undertaken by a few obscure and uneducated individuals in Galilee, is an extraordinary circumstance, and constitutes a presumptive evidence that they were conscious of acting under a divine commission. Christianity, even in her infancy, felt her native and celestial vigour, and boldly professed her resolution to exterminate the monsters which infested the earth. And the heroic achievement was crowned with complete success. The proud mythologies of Greece and Rome gradually receded before the banner of the cross; and so completely were they driven from the field, that not a vestige of them remains, not a single remnant is to be found. Here then is a splendid effect, which demonstrates beyond dispute the divinity of the cause.

But surely it could hardly have been expected

that this pure and simple doctrine, the professed object, and the accomplished design of which, was the extermination of heathen idolatry, should itself have been perverted to an idolatry * almost equally absurd and pernicious. It could hardly have been expected that the humble and lowly founder of the christian faith, a poor, uneducated, persecuted, and crucified Jew, should, by the ignorant zeal of his misguided disciples, be exalted not only to the dignity of an angelic or super-angelic being, but to a perfect equality with God himself. It could hardly have been supposed that the proper humanity of Jesus of Nazareth would have been left in a state of greater uncertainty than that of Moses. And surely it is not

* Idolatry is offering religious worship to a being who is not truly God. Unitarians, therefore, cannot but regard the worshipers of Christ as in this sense, idolaters: and intelligent Trinitarians are themselves ready to allow, that, if the doctrine of Christ's divinity is erroneous, they are chargeable with idolatry. The worship of Christ, therefore, cannot but be considered as a very deplorable deviation from the simplicity of the gospel; and it has led to many pernicious consequences. Christian idolatry ought, however, to be carefully distinguished from that heathen idolatry which is so strongly reprobated in the scriptures, and which countenanced, and indeed often consisted in, the perpetration of the most enormous crimes. See Mr. Lindsey's admirable Conversations upon Christian Idolatry.

so to those who with competent information, and with an unprejudiced mind, peruse the plain and artless records of his life and ministry. Nevertheless we see that divine Providence, in its unsearchable wisdom, has permitted these enormous errors to take root, and to spread to a degree which fills the reflecting mind with astonishment. In this state of things, the reason of which we cannot perfectly discover, it is our duty to acquiesce, as the appointment of unerring rectitude and wisdom, which doth all things well, and which, by means that baffle human penetration, carries on in the most efficacious manner its benevolent designs.

2. The errors into which christians have fallen concerning the person of Christ, and the homage that is due to him, constitute no valid objection against the truth and the divine authority of the christian religion.

The professed disciples of Christ have degenerated into idolatry. They have deified the humble prophet of Nazareth; they are become worshipers of the man Jesus. Nevertheless it does not follow, that the doctrine of Jesus is not from God: for that doctrine teaches the reverse of what its professors practise. Consult the authentic records of the christian faith, the history of the great apostle and high priest of our pro-

fession, the writings of the holy apostles and evangelists, you will there find that Jesus of Nazareth expressly disclaims all those titles of honour and respect, and all that external homage, which wore but the semblance of religious worship, and which might be interpreted into a claim of dignity and reverence, beyond what properly belonged to the prophet and messenger of God. Worship God, and him alone, was the uniform language of his precept and his example: and to this rule his apostles and their immediate proselytes invariably adhered. Nor can a single unequivocal instance be produced, of a personal address to Christ, when he was not himself sensibly present. Christian idolatry is no more to be regarded as an objection against the christian religion, than heathen idolatry is, against the authority and obligation of natural religion. The latter is the perversion, not the dictate, of the religion of nature: the former is the perversion of the divine religion of Jesus. Nor is it reasonable that the christian religion should be made answerable for the follies and extravagancies of those who profess it, and whose conduct often betrays the grossest ignorance of its nature and spirit. It is, indeed, a great difficulty, in the state of the moral world, that the great body of professing christians should have degenerated into a practice the very reverse

of that which the law of their profession prescribes. But this difficulty is not greater, than that the religion of nature should, by rational beings, be perverted to the gross superstitions of heathenism. And this, again, is not a greater difficulty, than the introduction of natural and moral evil into the world. Christian idolatry is a particular case of the general problem, and the solution of one case, will be the solution of all the rest. What the true solution is of this most difficult question, may not perhaps as yet be completely discovered. Yet surely it is unfair to draw conclusions from a single case, which would not be admitted in others that are exactly parallel. From the existence, therefore, of christian idolatry, it is unreasonable to infer a conclusion, unfavourable to the divine authority of the christian revelation.

3. We learn the rapid progress of error, and its tendency to multiply, and to extend itself without limits.

The beginning of error, like that of strife, is as when one letteth out water, we all know where it begins, but who can tell how far it will spread, or what mischief it will accomplish? Like Elijah's cloud, when it first appears it is of no greater extent than a man's hand, but by degrees, and often in a short time, it overspreads and darkens the whole

moral hemisphere*. This observation is eminently illustrated in the progress of erroneous opinions concerning the person of Christ. They who first heard his doctrine, and who saw his mighty works, said, Surely this is one of the ancient prophets who is risen from the dead. In less than three centuries afterwards, this holy prophet was exalted to divinity, and declared to be God of God, light of light, very God of very God, of the same substance with the Father, equal to him, one with him, and entitled to the same homage and adoration. Thus one error progressively and rapidly prepared the way for another, till, in the end, a morsel of bread consecrated by the priest, was believed to be the true and eternal God. Such is the amazing and continually accelerated march of error. How dangerous then is it, to take the first step of deviation, from the simplicity of christian doctrine! How solicitous should we be, to adhere firmly to the purity of the primitive faith!

4. The prevalence of error ought not to relax the exertions, nor to abate the zeal, of the sincere and earnest enquirers after christian truth.

The inveteracy and the general prevalence of error, though it be a very considerable obstruc-

* 1 Kings, xviii. 44.

tion to the discovery of truth, is not however an insurmountable obstacle. In the simplicity of truth there is something strongly attractive to the well disciplined mind: and in the evidence of truth, when distinctly perceived, there is an energy, which, though mild and gentle, is altogether irresistible. There is then no reason for despair. Though early prejudice deeply rooted, obstinate from age, and supported by self-interest, loudly exclaims against freedom of enquiry into religious opinions, as useless, dangerous, and even impious, and often closes the intellectual eye against the brightest evidence; yet to the serious and candid enquirer, who has strength of mind to burst the adamantine bonds, the evidence of truth will often appear more clear and distinct, than the difficulties, which perplexed his mind at the commencement of his enquiries, would allow him to expect.

This observation is particularly applicable to the controversy concerning the person of Christ. Let a sincere lover of truth, not too far advanced in life, not too strongly entangled by prejudice, and, above all, not biassed by interest in the result of his enquiry, anxious for information, willing to follow evidence whithersoever it may lead, and regardless of personal consequences, sit down to read the christian scriptures with at-

tention, with reflection, and with the use of such helps as may now be easily procured, and there can be little doubt of the result of the enquiry. I do not deny that some difficulties will occur, but to the honest mind, they will be chiefly such as arise from the habit of annexing to certain modes of expression, ideas which never occurred to the mind of the speaker or the writer. But, upon the whole, the doctrine of the proper humanity of Jesus Christ is so distinctly taught, or rather so evidently assumed, by the evangelical writers, that I cannot but think that an upright and enlightened mind, when once delivered from the film of prejudice, will be astonished to think that any other opinion should ever have been thought of. It will be ready to ask, Where are the expressions to be found, which give countenance to notions so various and extravagant, as those which have been entertained concerning the person of Christ? and will wonder by what enchantment, or infatuation, it could itself have been so long bewildered in so clear a case.

Neither is depth of learning, nor subtilty of metaphysical argumentation, in any degree necessary to forming a just conclusion upon this subject. The only qualifications requisite for this purpose are, uprightness of mind, a love of truth, patience of investigation, and a general acquaintance with the phraseology of scripture.

Young persons, I speak from long observation, who set themselves to enquire seriously and candidly, can scarcely fail of discovering the truth. Their minds are happily unshackled by prejudice, and their hearts are as yet free from the bias of self-interest. But, *amidst the smiles of fortune and of youth*, amidst the engagements of business and the blandishments of pleasure, where are those young persons to be found, who are willing to devote any considerable portion of their time to the serious perusal of the sacred scriptures? Still however, there are, doubtless, some of this description; and the number may be greater than the fears and suspicions, of those who are anxious for the improvement of the rising generation, may allow them to believe. If I might hope that I were now addressing any of this description, I would say to them, "Persevere, my young friends, in your truly honourable course. Search for truth, as for hidden treasure. It will amply reward your utmost efforts. Nor shall those efforts be exerted in vain. Divine Wisdom saith, I love them who love me; and they who seek me early shall find me *."

Let me add, then, fifthly—That it is the duty of all to enquire seriously, into the doctrine of the New Testament, concerning the person of Christ.

* Prov. ii. 4. viii. 17.

No person of correct judgment and of moderate information will presume to say that this is a question of no practical importance. Surely it is of some consequence, that a piece of bread should not be worshiped as a God: it is then of proportionable importance, to adhere closely to the declarations of the New Testament concerning the person of Christ. For, from error upon this subject did the monstrous doctrine of transubstantiation, and all its absurd, pernicious, and degrading consequences originally flow. It may be allowed that we, indeed, in this enlightened age and country, are in no hazard of returning to this extravagant opinion. Yet let us not imagine, that error is altogether harmless. Every error is attended with correspondent evil consequences. And in proportion to deviation from the simplicity of truth, will be embarrassment of understanding, and obliquity of conduct.

It is of no avail to plead that wise and good men, who have paid great attention to the subject, differ widely in their opinions concerning the person of Christ, and, therefore, that it is in vain to expect that we can discover the truth. This is the plea of ignorance and indolence combined; and the only proper answer to it is, TRY. Make every enquiry in your power. Truth may be more easy of attainment than you apprehend. But, if otherwise, you have done your duty; and

involuntary error will never be imputed as a crime. But error which is the result of indolence and criminal prejudice, admits of no excuse.

Nor is it enough to say that there are good men of all persuasions. Trinitarians, Arians, Unitarians, may all live in love to God, and to each other; and therefore speculative questions are of no importance. Is it then a question of trivial speculation, Whether there be one God only, or two, or three? Whether there be one or two Makers of the world? Whether there be one, or two, or three objects of religious adoration? Whether there be one God who is all vengeance, and another who is all mercy?

Human nature is, indeed, often inconsistent with itself; and they who are most correct in their speculative systems are not always proportionably correct in their moral conduct. But I must contend that, other things being equal, the man whose moral and theological system is most agreeable to truth, possesses the greatest advantages for improvement, and the best sources of consolation. He who regards the great mass of mankind, as destined to eternal misery by an arbitrary and irreversible decree, cannot enjoy the same satisfaction in contemplating the character and the works of God, which that man feels, who looks upon his fellow creatures as heirs with him, each in his own order, of glory, honour, and im-

mortal felicity. He that habitually regards his Maker as an omnipotent tyrant frowning upon the work of his hands, whatever conceit he may entertain of his own security in the general wreck, can never experience that profound veneration, that joyful confidence, that affectionate gratitude, that filial love, which is the natural and spontaneous result of just and exalted thoughts of God, and habitual respect to him as a father, benefactor, and friend. Nor can he, whose attention is distracted by three objects of religious worship, of different characters and with equal claims, take that unmixed delight in the offices of devotion, which another will do who reposes his whole confidence in, and addresses his undivided aspirations to, the one all-sufficient God. If therefore it be an attainment of high and acknowledged importance to form just conceptions of the great object of our religious homage, it must be conceded that it is an attainment of no inconsiderable moment, to avoid those numerous and pernicious errors, into which the majority of professing christians have fallen, concerning the person of Jesus Christ.

For this reason, those virtuous, and truly respectable persons, are deserving of the highest applause, whose generous and enlightened zeal, in times less favourable than the present to the profession of important but unpopular truth, erec-

ted this building, the first in modern times, and in this great city, as a house expressly appropriated to the worship of the ONE GOD, agreeably to the instructions of that great medium of divine communications to the human race, the MAN Christ Jesus. Of these generous advocates and supporters of primitive christianity, by far the greater number have passed to their long home. But, blessed be God! the cause which they espoused survives and flourishes; and if there be truth in the christian religion, it shall never be extinguished, but shall shine more and more unto the perfect day. In the mean time we may justly congratulate that venerable man* for whose immediate use this temple was raised, and who here found a peaceful and secure asylum, after having made the noblest sacrifices for truth and a good conscience, that he has lived to see the tide of opposition and prejudice which he encountered, in a great degree reduced, and the vessel which was launched amidst rocks and shoals and tempests, now making way in a smooth sea, and with a prosperous gale. Of the superlative excellence of the doctrine which he taught,

* The Rev. Theophilus Lindsey, A. M., who for conscience sake resigned the valuable living of Catterick, in Yorkshire, A. D. 1773, accepted the office of minister of the Unitarian congregation which was formed in Essex-street A. D. 1774, and resigned his charge in July 1794.

and of the morals which he inculcated, his example has uniformly exhibited a living proof. And to his writings, in connexion with those of his great philosophical friend who is now no more, I will not say that I, or you, but the whole christian world is indebted, perhaps more than to any other composition, except the sacred scriptures. His friendship I shall ever prize, as the honour and felicity of my life. And the consideration that I am engaged to occupy that station, in which he once laboured with a zeal so enlightened, with a spirit so truly christian, and with success so encouraging, is at once elevating and humbling. O, that we might hope, that a double portion of the prophet's spirit might rest, where his mantle falls*!

The station to which I am now invited, in succession to a minister of highly respectable talents and character, involuntarily laid aside by bodily infirmity†, I regard as the most honourable in the christian world. It is a distinction, in my estimation, greatly to be preferred to an episcopal mitre, or, an archiepiscopal throne. Yet, honourable and important as it is, I can truly say it was not the object of my ambition, nor of my

* 2 Kings, ii. 9, 10.

† The Rev. John Disney, D. D. F. S. A., who immediately succeeded Mr. Lindsey, and who retired from his office on account of ill health at Lady-day last.

expectation. Happy in a situation which left me nothing to wish, connected with an enlightened and liberal society of christians, amongst whom that freedom and plainness of speech, which is the first duty of a christian minister, not only did not give offence, but recommended to esteem, and conciliated affection, I neither sought after, nor desired a change. But when a sphere of superior usefulness presented itself, the sense of duty did not admit of long hesitation. And to this highly respectable society my future labours are to be principally dedicated.

In the discharge of this honourable office, while I regard it as an indispensable duty to exhibit christian truth without disguise, all that I request is a patient and a candid hearing. The sole object of my public addresses will be to promote your improvement, to the utmost of my power, in christian knowledge and in virtuous practice. And to this end I shall state, as opportunity may offer, and ability may admit, those exalted views of the character and government of God, of the nature and design of the christian revelation, and of the ultimate tendencies of the divine dispensations, the firm belief, and the serious steady contemplation of which, will fill the mind with habitual gratitude, benevolence, and joy; and which, I will venture to say, if they were universally received, duly considered, and practi-

cally regarded, would produce the happiest and the most beneficial change in the state of the moral world, and would convert the wilderness into a paradise.

That all which may be occasionally advanced upon these interesting subjects, should command immediate and universal assent, is too much to expect. But while we agree in truths which are of the greatest practical importance, let us learn to differ upon points of inferior moment, with humility and candour. Let us think freely, judge charitably, and ever keep the mind open to conviction.

One principle I beg leave to lay down as an axiom never to be called in question for a moment: That TRUTH is a treasure beyond all price, and that the attainment of it is well worthy our most laborious exertions.

A second principle, and one of equal evidence and value, is this: That all truth, and especially all moral and religious truth, must ultimately be favourable to virtue.

If we admit and adhere to these principles, I trust that, by the blessing of God upon our future connexion with each other, neither shall I speak, nor will you hear, in vain.

THE END.

A PRAYER.

ALMIGHTY and most merciful God! the heavens declare thy glory, and the earth is full of thy praise.

We bless thee, that as in former ages thou wast pleased, occasionally and obscurely, in a limited and a partial manner, to reveal thyself by the prophets; thou hast in these latter days spoken unto us by Jesus Christ, who has been publicly declared to be the Son of God, and the Prince of Life, by the powerful operation of thy holy spirit, in raising him from the dead. We thank thee, that by him thou hast been pleased to make a complete discovery of thy benevolent designs concerning the human race: of thy fixed and immutable purpose of bringing many sons to glory, and of raising to a happy and everlasting life, those who by patient continuance in well-doing are seeking for glory, honour, and immortality.

We rejoice in all the benefits which have accrued to mankind from the diffusion of the gospel: that in proportion as the knowledge and the spirit of the christian religion have prevailed,

the understanding has been opened and the heart enlarged, the mists of error and superstition have been dispelled, an ardent love to truth and liberty, and a generous zeal to promote the welfare of others, has been excited in the breast, and the natural, the social, and the moral state of the world has been signally improved.

We triumph in the conviction that the religion of Jesus is still advancing in its carreer, that it is gradually purifying itself from the corruptions which the lapse of ages has introduced into it, and that the light of truth is advancing with such accelerated speed, as to excite a pleasing hope that the time may not be far distant, when every anti-christian error shall be removed, and when the religion of Jesus shall appear in its native simplicity and beauty. Hasten, O Lord, the accomplishment of this desirable event. May thy kingdom come! And may there never be wanting a succession of able and of faithful men, who inheriting the spirit of their glorious leader, and of the first teachers of the christian doctrine, shall esteem it their honour to be instrumental in promoting the cause of truth, whether by their labours or their sufferings!

O God! clouds and darkness are about thee. The methods by which thy wise and benevolent plan of order, of virtue, and of happiness, is con-

ducted, are to us unsearchable: and our limited understandings are unable to fathom the depth of thy mysterious counsels. Thy thoughts are above our thoughts, and thy ways are far beyond our comprehension. But we are assured, and we rejoice in the assurance, that thy thoughts and ways are always best: that thy counsels are unerring and unchangeable: and that those events, which to our feeble apprehension appear most contrary to thy design, will ultimately accomplish thy benevolent purposes, and are all essential parts of thy great and glorious plan. Whatever clouds may from time to time hang over the affairs of men, we are still assured that thy sacred cause, the cause of truth, of virtue, and of happiness, is continually advancing, and will in the end universally prevail. May thy will, O God, be done, and may every opposing will be humbled and subdued!

May we, who are now assembled in thy presence, be solicitous in our respective stations to perform the various duties incumbent upon us! May we be rational, serious, consistent christians, adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour, and recommending the holy religion we profess, by a character and conduct uniformly pious, benevolent, and pure! doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God! If we have hitherto been culpably inattentive to the most important

concerns, may future diligence and zeal manifest a contrite sense of past errors and transgressions! And whatever our hand findeth to do, may we do it with our might! as there is no working, knowledge, or device, in the grave, whither we are going. Thus, after a life of piety and usefulness, may we make our end in peace, and finally receive the reward of our faith and virtue, in our complete and everlasting salvation!

These our supplications we offer up in humble reliance upon thine infinite mercy, and unite in ascribing to thee, the One Living and True God, everlasting praises. Amen.

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